

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
19 October 1986

Perspective

Security council expanding role in contra war

By Nicholas M. Horrock

WASHINGTON—In June, 1984, when Congress barred the Central Intelligence Agency from continued involvement in the angry little war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, the Reagan administration was faced with a dilemma.

It had some 15,000 "freedom fighters" in the field, a force larger than a U.S. Army division, that it wanted to arm, feed, clothe, train and direct in battle until President Reagan could get Congress to approve further military and CIA aid. Although Congress finally has voted \$100 million in such aid, the money has yet to be delivered.

What has been emerging slowly in the intervening 27 months is evidence of an astounding story of how a determined president has run an extensive jungle war from the offices of his National Security Council. The whole story may not be known until Reagan leaves office, if then, but even what already is on the record is an intriguing picture of an unusual role for the supersecret NSC.

After the CIA funds were cut off, the leaders of the main "contra" rebel group began to talk of getting their support from a group of private citizens in the U.S. Among the support groups have been the World Anti-Communist League and the United States Council for World Freedom, both directed by John K. Singlaub, a retired Army general.

Singlaub was linked in news accounts to the flight of a C-123 K Fairchild cargo plane shot down by a Soviet-made missile two weeks ago in Nicaragua. He has denied involvement.

The Sandinistas claim the C-123 was making weapons airdrops to anti-government forces in southern Nicaragua. They are holding Eugene Hasenfus, an American who parachuted from the plane; two other Americans and another unidentified man also aboard the plane died in the crash.

Hasenfus has said he thought he had been engaged by the CIA as a cargo handler on the flights. Nicaragua says it intends to place him on trial Monday on charges of supplying weapons and ammunition to the contras for the CIA.

The Reagan administration has tended to put forth a notion that a few private groups could raise the vast amounts of money and support to fund a venture the size of the contra initiative.

Even during the months of reduced activity, the contras require extensive assistance. They needed food and clothes for not only the fighting men, but for what has been estimated at another 15,000 non-combatants, families and relatives of the field soldiers. They also needed ammunition for a wide range of weapons, replacement arms, intelligence data from the U.S.'s vast resources that include overflights of Nicaragua, aircraft, petroleum for aircraft and ground vehicles, to name just a partial list.

Congressional investigators from the beginning have suspected that the private funds never have come close to filling these demands. They suspect, but cannot prove, that several foreign nations—Israel often is mentioned as one of them—have extended assistance to the contras. Israel consistently denies the allegation.

This foreign assistance, the congressional detectives suspect, will be repaid by the U.S. to the contributing countries through eased terms on their military and foreign aid payments. The aid, they suspect, often has been routed through the private American groups to give it the appearance of coming from civilian donations.

Even after the U.S. government's official withdrawal from directing the war, members of the NSC staff seemed to have extensive information on contra activities. Constantine Menges, a former CIA official; Jackie Tillman, one-time aide to Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North were among those on the NSC who could impart a lot of details to reporters, if they chose to do so.

In August, 1985, North was accused by several administration sources, who asked not to be identified, of maintaining "liaison" with the contras. Adolpho Calero, a civilian leader of united anti-Sandinista forces, later acknowledged that North had made two trips to Honduras and had arranged meetings for the contra leaders with Reagan.

But when congressional investigators tried to delve further into the case, they met, as one Senate aide called it, "a stone wall." Part of the stone wall relies upon the unique role of the NSC. Unlike other executive branch employees, members of the White House staff—and North holds that status—cannot easily be compelled to testify before congressional committees.

North has been connected to Robert Owen, a young activist who once worked in Washington, D.C. for the politically connected public relations firm of Robert Gray and Co. News accounts earlier this year cited Owen as being the conduit for plans and assistance between private groups, such as the ones run by Gen. Singlaub, and North.

Owen's business card was found on the body of one of the Americans who died in the C-123 crash.

Shortly after his capture, Hasenfus told the Sandinista government he was working for a man named Max Gomez, a former CIA official. Hasenfus claimed Gomez often boasted he had connections with Vice President George Bush.

Bush has denied running the operations, but acknowledged knowing Gomez through his aide for national security, Donald Gregg.

Like North, Gregg is an assistant on the NSC and cannot easily be brought before Congress to tell his full role. He told The Tribune last week that he did know Gomez. Gregg came to the White House during President Jimmy Carter's term after completing a full career in the CIA. He was involved in one of most

Continued

famous CIA airdrop-campaigns when groups of agents were dropped into Manchuria and North Korea during the Korean War.

Gregg later served in Korea as station chief, the senior CIA man in the country, and knew Gen. Singlaub, as well as Gomez.

If nothing else about this affair yet is established fully, it is clear that Ronald Reagan is taking the NSC to a new dimension of activism.

Only a few days before the C-123 went down, the NSC was identified as the source of a plan to destabilize Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. Part of this plan, according to the Washington Post, included giving the press misinformation that suggested Libya faced imminent attack from the U.S. and that Gadhafi's regime was shaken by unrest.

The NSC was formed in 1947, and gained power and prominence as center for American policy under President Dwight Eisenhower. It was conceived as a sort of "war cabinet," a place where a president could get quick, independent advice and counsel on national security that was not encumbered by bureaucratic prerogatives.

Fifteen years later, however, President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, used the NSC to bypass the State Department and open secret negotiations with China and North Vietnam.

Kissinger's unusually secret and direct relationship with the president, it later was charged, spurred a military spying operation in the White House to supply Kissinger's private memorandums to Admiral Thomas Moorer, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

A young Navy yeoman serving as an NSC clerk was accused of stealing the material, but senior Navy officers denied instructing him to do so.

At the same time, Nixon's secret maneuvers also were slipping into public print, and the President appointed several aides as "plumbers"—E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy—to stop those leaks. A year later, they broke into the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate and ended Nixon's presidency.

The reason presidents are drawn to the NSC is that it provides secrecy and can elude the hand and eye of opponents in Congress. But there are some uncomfortable historical questions being raised by the NSC and the war in Nicaragua.

Cumbersome as it may appear to an active president, his power to declare war and involve the nation in a foreign adventure was tempered by Congress' power to control the purse strings. If Ronald Reagan has found a way to conduct a foreign war using NSC staff officers and loans against future appropriations, he may open the door to a realm of uncontrolled presidential power even he would be uncomfortable with.